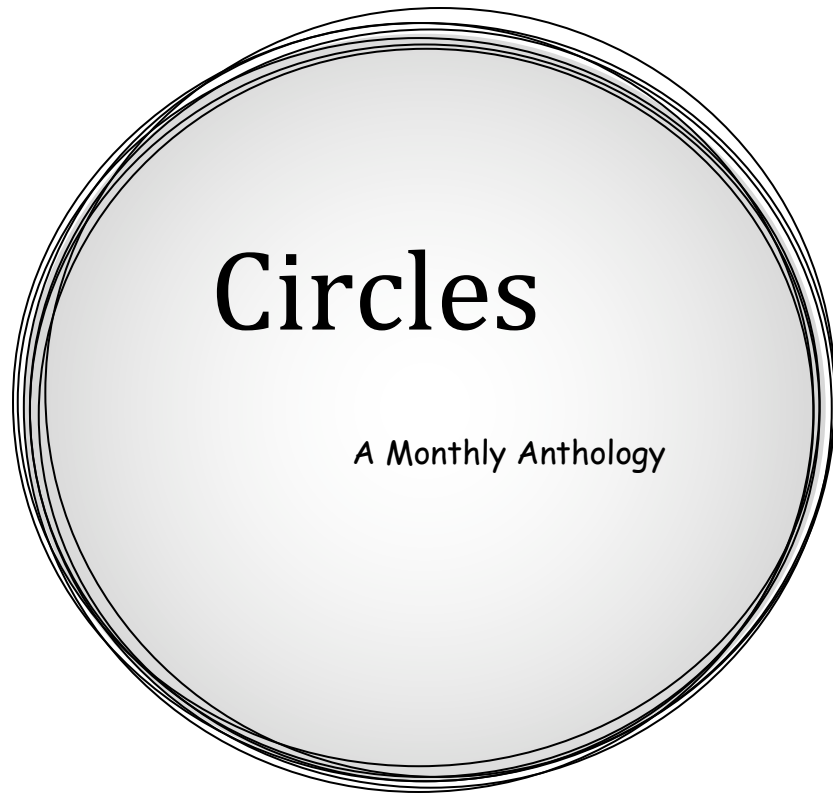




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The Editor to the Reader

1. The beginning of Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Dial* was an address from the two editors to the reader, though Emerson is considered its author. What I would like to say, however, is closer to Orestes Brownson's "Introductory Remarks" to his literary venture, the *Boston Quarterly Review*, every issue of which he wrote almost entirely himself. There's some big ego stuff at the beginning—about being *called* to what will likely be a failed venture, etc, etc.—and eventually he does call his later effort *Brownson's Quarterly Review*—so he seems especially conscious of taking on the entire *town's* name—and not just any town, but the already-pretentious Boston. And it doesn't even take him long to owning that, yeah, "I undertake this Review, then, for myself; not because I am certain the public wants it, but because I want it." So why *Boston Review* and not *Brownson's*? "I add the epithet Boston, both to designate the place when it is published, and to pay a sort of compliment to this goodly city." The compliment is that "Boston is, say what you will of it, the city of 'notions,' and of new notions, too; and in the progress of liberal ideas in this country, it ever has and ever will take the lead."

Did he imagine the Boston Brahmins all going, "Oh, *do go on!*" I'm not sure the flattery got him anywhere, but he wasn't wrong about Boston. And the *liberality* does mean something: "it is proper to call my Review the *Boston Review*, intimating thereby that it contains in some sort *Boston* notions." One thing this meant was a sense of free inquiry, the liberality to consider all sides of everything, something places like perhaps (Calvinist-controlled) Princeton or New Haven did not have: "It is a free Journal. It will be open to the discussion of all subjects of general and permanent interest, by any one who is able to express his thoughts—providing he has any—with spirit, in good temper, and in good taste." So also here, in whatever taste I have, but I hope in a positive, supportive temper toward others in our *Circles*.

2. But really, Brownson's introductory remarks make his *Boston Quarterly Review* an early American blog. When you read him say that, when other means of communication aren't open to you, a person "must have his own medium of communication, organs of his own through which he can speak, or else he must remain silent," I think it's easy to hear the so-called revolution of the internet. The first 50 years, say, of the 19th century were a lot like these recent, early years of the internet, I think. Historians will be the ones who tell us when those early years ended, though I'm sure we can see the signs, but a significant element the two periods have in common is

the open frontier regarding organs of publication. The earliest voices were the only voices—amateurs competed with professionals in every area of inquiry. In part, this is because the very idea of professional inquiry was just coming into view.

I think a lot about amateurism and inquiry, especially as it relates to democracy. But what seems relevant here is the constraints we put on ourselves when we're pretending to be academics. I think most of the time it has deleterious effects on our writing. Brownson says this about the function of "Review": "I call it a Review, because that term is indefinite, and allows me to discourse on any thing I please." We lose this capacity if we don't practice it, and like anything it takes practice to do well. One of my favorite lines in Stanley Cavell's work is something like, "I want to write the kind of philosophy where I can go from one kind of topic to any other topic I wish." Like so much about freedom, it sounds easy, but we should regard it as a challenge.

3. David Bromwich once said that we mainly read literary criticism for the quotations—a critic's function is to prune an anthology of text. This will be by its nature a secular bible, filled with the passages of books worth returning to, over and over. This journal is, from this perspective, a kind of worship service, creating our liturgical calendar. Every issue will begin with a Benediction, a reading from the Gospel according to Whomever. Normally a blessing would occur at the end, but nobody is going to walk out of a worship service in the middle, especially not when you're waiting to get that magical priest-blessing. But the writer's beginning is often the reader's end as they get bored and flip to something else, so we will lead with the blessing of a text that works some sort of magic.

The forms and genres of our writing we will discover as we go. I intend to be open to all possibilities. But in line with Bromwich, I see the most valuable part of our work to be the public appreciation of the touchstones of our imaginations. We will have hymns of text from the past, unadorned, but homilies, close readings, and classic review-essays, too, and a sermon every month. I never appreciated in my youth the significance of church worship as a space where people with a book in common got together to talk about it. We happen to lead bookish lives, so let this place allow us to share that life with each other, passed through the fire of our thought, as Emerson put it in the Divinity School Address.

4. Literature was my field, but I've come to think of my metier as intellectual history, and especially the intellectual communities that surround my favorite writers. Anyone who spends five seconds with me will hear the names "Emerson" and "Rorty" dropped unconsciously, and these

two figures emanate out across many of the spider webs that make their respective century's intellectual communities. Emerson's father—though he died when Emerson was eight—was one of the founders of the *Monthly Anthology*, the earliest American journal of opinion. Both of Rorty's parents were writers who circled around the New York Intellectuals and the *Partisan Review*. Intellectual communion and influence is often a personal affair, and rarely a professional one. Who trains you is more important than what in. Isms are good organizational devices, but as abstractions they rarely cause the spark required for thoughts worth shaping and sharing. If they do, you might be a philosopher.

5. The eye makes the first circle, Emerson knew, but you make the second. Every we made pulls a third person into the first, expanding us. Our spiritual lives demand the ebb and flow of communion with others, both society and solitude.

Note to Future Contributors. Our readers are all potential contributors, so please send me something! Since this is for our own pleasure and edification, I request only that which pleases and edifies you—I feel no need to manufacture “content,” as they say. I am looking for anything literary or nontechnical. Essays, columns, stories, poems, dialogues, diaries, scenes, sketches. Philosophy is welcome, but please no “theory”—I want to avoid academic writing. No discursive footnotes, and quotations will go uncited in text. Critical prose can be scholarly, even pedantic, but academic writing is suicide in Emerson's sense. I want reviews of books, reporting of literary events, historical nuggets especially; secular sermons, close readings, and what Emerson called “large criticism.” The experience of books is what a literary journal is for. Introduce us to someone new.



Benediction: A Reading from the Book of Emerson

From *Essays*, “Circles”

Our moods do not believe in each other. To-day, I am full of thoughts, and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression to-morrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world: but, yesterday, I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall.

I love this passage—it speaks to every writer. *Moods* are more than emotions, and more like the atmosphere of our mind. By making a mood analogous to a person, Emerson gives each mood a whole life and perspective, one easily transumed by some other, usurper mood. *Mood* is also a grammatical category, and it too plays on a meaning for *logical mode*. As a grammatical category, everything is of a certain slant, changing its nature depending on the slant assumed. As a logical mode, mood suggests something more than thoughts, as well, and something more like *independent coherences*, those autonomous people you don't believe, yet sometimes leave evidence of their existence. Sometimes I like to imagine the passage in a Gothic mood, with the *Egads!* discovery of some other personality who takes over and writes in your journal while you're not looking.

Writing out, to the best of our ability, some perception of life, the way things strike you *now*—this isn't a requirement of self-reliance, but it helps. It helps to try and pull as many of our thoughts together as we can just to discover our limits. How *do* we fit together, as a coherent self? *Do* we? *Am* I coherent? The brilliance of *Our moods do not believe in each other!* is to suggest that passion, sentiment, our emotions and affections are what glue thoughts together into intelligible selves.

I would write it on the lintels of this journal! 'Our moods do not believe in each other—let to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words, for I cannot spend the day in explanation. Our life is a train of moods like an iron string of many-colored beads, and every heart must vibrate to it!'



There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal of Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death

— Dickinson



Series: Bowen, Textbooks, Tradition

1. Nobody learns about Francis Bowen when studying the history of American philosophy, though he was probably the first significant professor of philosophy here. The chapters on Bowen in Bruce Kuklick's still excellent *The Rise of American Philosophy* (1977) deserve a place in every historian of American thought's syllabus. What we learn there is that Bowen began as a significant figure in New England's intellectual culture, taking on the Transcendentalists from a post at Harvard, before becoming increasingly isolated as academia became increasingly specialized. Bowen had his hand in religious, philosophical, literary, scientific, and political subjects—this being a time when many of them overlapped—and, as Kuklick relates it, he just ended up on the wrong side of the most important controversies. Kuklick thinks that Bowen was on the right side of the argument against the Transcendentalists—whose understanding of the philosophers they'd refer to was, shall we say, not as well-developed and solid as Bowen's—but Bowen's rejection of Darwin doomed him.

I learned about Bowen from Kuklick while studying the Transcendentalists, and I think Kuklick is right—Bowen definitely seems to have understood Kant and Hume far better than, say, Emerson. His philosophical work is always well-argued and dovetails with many of the ways scholars answer questions of interpretation regarding the major philosophers. Where I differ from Bowen and Kuklick is in thinking that Bowen's professional mode of doing philosophy is the only mode worth having. This I learned from how Rorty handled Derrida, for example, where we can perceive many other interesting things we can do with texts that “do philosophy.” If philosophy is going to remain the “love of wisdom,” philosophers and other intellectuals need to get off their high horse regarding routes to wisdom. Grandmas and hayseeds might not have fancy educations or explicit arguments, but they still might have wisdom if we can

hear it. Same goes for literature and all the other ways we reflect on our existence.

This is the first lesson I take from Bowen's example: there is more to life, and thus philosophy and thinking, than argument and therefore *expertise*. Against the Transcendentalists, like Emerson and Alcott, Bowen stood for clear argument and professional expertise. Bowen, indeed, understood that there was more to life than argument and expertise, which is why he spent his life both teaching and curating educational materials, as someone knowledgeable about philosophy, literature, economics, and science (among other subjects), as well as arguing and deploying his expertise as a public intellectual in venues like the *North American Review*, which he edited and wrote heavily for between 1843 and 1853. Bowen, however, was ably defending assumptions built into at least one form of life on its way out. You have to have assumptions to function as premises to make an argument; one needs stable assumptions to form a disciplinary matrix for experts to have something they know better than non-experts. But religion as the center of life and knowledge was becoming wrecked by both Darwinian naturalism, which he called a "dirt-philosophy," and democracy, which he stoutly believed in. In Bowen's defense, the very nature of what science is was in flux during this time period. But the de-centering effects of the democratic ethos, I think, are actually deeper than scientific praxis.

I don't know yet whether Bowen understood this about democracy. I've read enough of and about Bowen to be confident about his view of the conflict between religion and science, and enough to be confident in his support of democratic practices (some of which I sketch below). But whether he came to see that it was democratic freedoms that were undermining traditional faith in Christianity as a revealed religion I'm unsure. I am not sure he was what we would today call a "Christian nationalist." What is clear from this movement currently is that it is not enough for Christianity to be the biggest, numbers-wise. Whether they say it or not, the energy derives from their willingness to tear democracy down if Christianity is not the dominant religion, with "dominance" meaning that all other non-religious institutions curve towards its gravitational pull. An "is dominant" is not enough for these people; they need a "must always be dominant." Bowen lived at a time when Christianity simply was dominant—institutions clearly curved toward it. But would Bowen have given up on democracy if it was clear that Christianity was losing its dominance? The freedom of religion must mean, on this analogy with gravity, that no religious pull should be felt if a person does not want to feel it. And the effects have been clear: though Christianity still is dominant, and has the greatest pull in

the United States, the Pew Research Center reported in January that the Nones—people with no particular religious affiliation and check “none” in the religious box—have grown to 28%. Bowen thought people *should* be Christian, but so far he seems to me like someone who thought the truth of that would win out in a free and open encounter. He’s been wrong about that, but I’m not sure that would’ve changed his mind about the importance in letting each person decide this on their own. That seems to me to be the nub.



Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditateness; and who offers to ship with the Phædon instead of Bowditch in his head. Beware of such an one, I say: your whales must be seen before they can be killed; and this sunken-eyed young Platonist will tow you ten wakes round the world, and never make you one pint of sperm the richer. Nor are these monitions at all unneeded. For nowadays, the whale-fishery furnishes an asylum for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the carking cares of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber

“Why, thou monkey,” said a harpooner to one of these lads, “we’ve been cruising now hard upon three years, and thou hast not raised a whale yet. Whales are scarce as hen’s teeth whenever thou art up here.” Perhaps they were; or perhaps there might have been shoals of them in the far horizon; but lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, they spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Wickliff’s sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over.

There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at midday, in the

fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!

——— Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Ch. 35, “The Mast-Head”



From the Library: Reviews of Old, But Hot Off the Shelf
Schneewind's Backgrounds to Victorian Literature

1. Jerome B. Schneewind, who died recently, was a professor of philosophy for many years at Pittsburgh and Johns Hopkins, serving as president of the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division in 1995-96. His earliest book was a slim volume worth finding for half-off prices, *Backgrounds to Victorian Literature*, written for students of literature seeking to broaden their understanding of the political, intellectual, and religious contexts. How does a professor of philosophy come to write a book of history for students of literature? It speaks to Schneewind's versatility and flexibility of manner and purpose. Historians sometimes don't quite grasp the conceptual stakes in philosophical discourse when they cover it, just as philosophers sometimes don't ever grasp the broader stakes of philosophical discourse for their community when they cover it. Schneewind is very much the philosopher's historian of philosophy in his enormously valuable *The Invention of Autonomy* (1998), as in his Sidgwick book, *Sidgwick and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (1977). *Backgrounds*, without sacrificing sophistication, is simply the slickest condensation of political, economic, social, intellectual, religious, and cultural themes of the British 19th century I've laid hands on.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, “Politics,” covers major material aspects like population growth, industrialization, and colonial rule and the political responses: the Reform Act of 1832, the Factory Act, the “poor laws,” Corn Laws, Home Rule, Chartism (wait, what? that rings a bell...), laissez-faire economics, English socialism, the Fabian Society, Tories, Whigs, Liberals, Conservatives. Again, Schneewind's ability to focus in on different aspects in his short, 2-5 page sections, while also telling the story of the age, is a model of writing. The most interesting motifs to me are the bits that reflect on democratic practices and the uses of economic theory, which the leftist Schneewind handles with a sublime irony. The Reform Act, for example, was in part a response to the French Revolution and the populist power the world over witnessed. It expanded suffrage, but it was hotly

debated in Parliament; they were forced to cede power to the people, kicking and screaming. But voting rights mainly, and slowly, were given to the expanding middle class only: “No one in the respectable classes was a democrat,” meaning a believer in the core of democracy, which requires an essential equality. Why? Because of the rage of those whose necks they were standing on: “Since in its early decades the vast majority of the workers were illiterate and ignorant of politics, as well as desperately poor, the feeling is not surprising [in the middle classes].” But the workers were not so ignorant, and didn’t give a shit about the unsurprising self-interest of the covetous mercantile class, and responded to the Reform Act’s lukewarm embrace of suffrage expansion with Chartism, named after “the People’s Charter,” a six-point list of reforms including universal suffrage for men and, most interesting to me, voting by secret ballot “instead of by declaring one’s vote in public, in the presence of highly partisan crowds, as was done until 1872.” That seems *so late*, but it illustrates the highly varied trajectories of democratic practices, partly because they were all experimental. Hey, the American Experiment still trundles along in some form, but the first French Experiment was a fantastic disaster.

Other revealing bits: “The tendency to reproach those who remained poor—and to praise those who succeeded—was not merely incidental to the laissez-faire theory. Its individualistic economic approach carried with it an ethic of individual economic responsibility. The demand for absolute freedom of contract presupposed a belief in each man’s complete ability to control his financial destiny.” Which is so stupid on its face, yet it’s constantly at issue today, with NDAs, corporate terms-and-agreement hussles, and labor union struggles. Robert Owen, a “self-made millionaire” and “founder of effective socialism in England,” rejected this metaphysical belief in absolute freedom and instead thought a person’s character was created by their environment. He founded a utopian community, and had a large following “until he announced his militant atheism.” The association of atheism and immorality, however, was no doubt buttressed by the fact that church parishes were one of the two “effective administrative units” of British government (with urban boroughs), carrying on “numerous secular jobs,” including policing, maintenance of roads, sanitation, education, and taking care of the poor.

The final two chapters, “Religion” and “Morality,” give a lot more color to this relationship between religious belief, which is a stand-in for root assumptions about our place in the universe, and social practices found in political government, economic behavior, the home, and other social spaces. “Religion” covers the narrow religious debates of the era and how

they were altered by such things as biblical criticism and Darwin, giving us a view of the high church, broad church, Dissenters and Nonconformists, Cardinal Newman, William Paley, D. F. Strauss. "Morality," on the other hand, covers the broad social practices and proprieties of the age and the narrow attempts by thinkers to explain, justify, or rebuff those practices. British Christianity was pushed and pulled in two directions, by the state and by science. The Anglican Church was the official church, which posed problems of control—as Americans are learning now, to get religion into politics means that politics will get into religion. The broad-church movement was the liberalizing tendency in England, evolving a set of mute-buttons on religious doctrines to get it out of the way of both science and the religious diversity of society. The two most prominent were the same here as there: a mythic or allegorical interpretation of the Bible, which allows science to determine the age of the world and whatnot, and an ethical interpretation of Jesus, holding him up as a role model rather than divine oracle dictating to us.

Some of the most interesting contrasts with the American scene come from the chapter on morality because it digs into the slow shift away from a patriarchal-feudal system. It's roughly the same thing the United States had to do, but the process was far slower over there. A cento of passages:

"If distinctions of rank were firm, they were not so abrupt and unbridgeable as they were later to become. The yeomanry and the tenant farmers were linked both with the gentry and nobility and with the more highly skilled village craftsmen, and they in turn were not sharply separated from the lesser craftsmen and the laborers. Dialects, diets, and customs were shared in all the ranks in a locality. Travel was hard and rare, people lived where their ancestors had lived, and they worked for squires for whom their forebears had worked.

"In the new view the relations between rank and career were reversed. A hierarchy of social classes, carrying various degrees of dignity and prestige, was accepted, but social climbing, far from being considered exceptional, was encouraged and emphasized. The reason was that a man's rank in society was considered in this view to be—ideally at least—not a matter of birth, but a matter of his success in his career.

"Where the patriarchal-feudal view took seriously the dictum that the poor are always with us, and considered the poor as fulfilling a calling to their rank no less than other members of the community, the middle-class view saw poverty as a reproach, because it indicated insufficient industry.

"But although there were some who worked their way up from manual labor to affluence, and although many of the highly skilled workers adopted some middle-class attitudes and ways, the bulk of the lower classes remained unconvinced. One of the main reasons for this was that the ideals preached to them were hopelessly unattainable.

"Aside from the necessity imposed on the laborer's wife of doing her own housework, the housing available to working-class families could not sustain the middle-class elements of privacy and cleanliness. Overcrowding of the worst sort existed in the tiny cottages of the countryside as well

as in the tenements of the cities. Where whole families, or perhaps several families, lived in one room, the demands of prudishness were laughable, and the chances of keeping children innocent and girls virginal were almost nonexistent. Water supplies and sewage disposal were primitive throughout the cities of England in the early Victorian era.... The situation in one of the worst parts of London in mid-century, a row of houses overlooking an open sewage ditch into which privies emptied, will suggest the problem: 'The water... is covered with a scum almost like a cobweb, and prismatic with grease... against the posts of the bridge are swollen carcasses of dead animals... Along the banks are heaps of indescribable filth... and yet... THIS WAS THE ONLY WATER THE WRETCHED INHABITANTS HAD TO DRINK...' It is no wonder that the health of the working classes was poor.

"Not the least important factor in the rise of class consciousness was the new facility with which workingmen could keep in touch with one another. If the disappearance of 'the poor' and their replacement by the working classes is a mark of the end of the patriarchal-feudal structure of society, then some sense can be made of Thomas Arnold's attribution of the decline of feudalism to the railroads. They carried the cheap letters made possible by the penny post (1839) and the cheap periodicals which thrived after the lowering of the taxes on newspapers (1836) and on paper (1861). And by providing cheap transport and enabling men easily to move about in search of work, they completed in fact what had been finished legally by the New Poor Law of 1834—the freeing of the peasant from his ancient status as tied to the soil."

2. Reading Schneewind's book on British Victorians reminds me of a feeling I've been trying to formulate. It comes out when thinking about the difference between John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Francis Bowen (1811-1890), maybe our first significant philosophy professor. Whereas Mill cannot be avoided in any good political philosophy course, there are simply no American philosophers of comparable stature from that time period *in American philosophy instruction*. That's the important caveat because our image of Mill is in part as a public intellectual, and he held a stature that is comparable when the two are considered as public intellectuals. Perhaps we might scoff that even as editor of *North American Review* he didn't have the power of a Mill. But then take Emerson—his American light was as bright as Mill's, or at least comparable. But he isn't taught in philosophy departments either, for his philosophy *and* public-intellectual performance are so very different from Mill and Bowen's. If Emerson is taught, it is in literature courses, with the novels of Melville and Hawthorne and the poetry of Dickinson and Whitman. And while this is an important context, it also means the context they all shared with Bowen and other essayists like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. and James Russell Lowell finds no sanctioned educational outlet. So this is what I always feel burn when reading good books on British Victorian intellectual history: it always seems like so many more of them are being taught in more places, neglecting vital American resources.

But really, the problem is the difference between two kinds of courses: one that teaches history for accuracy, and one that teaches history because it informs living issues. One reason to argue, for example, that philosophy should have its own department is that philosophy is still happening. So one learns what Kant is up to because what Kant does in his books informs the choices one might make on contemporary philosophical issues. History is still happening, of course, but one doesn't generally learn about Roman aqueducts because it informs contemporary engineering issues or city-planning—though it could! The fun thing about history is that it can come alive at any moment.

My beef, I guess then, is that there are intellectual conversations in our historical past that are not alive to us today because we are not given good educations in them. The history of argument about religion in America is *vital* important to a deep understanding of contemporary political concerns. The force of evangelicalism goes deep into our past and responses to it have been many, giving us a record of possible responses today. Yet the historian David Hollinger has remarked that one thing historians of American philosophy have said *nothing* about is *why and how religion disappeared from American philosophy departments*. The answer obviously begins with: More and more people don't give a shit about religion. But since some people still want to have the arguments that people were having in earnest in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the don't-give-a-shits are at a disadvantage, argumentatively speaking, which is not a good look if one of your talking points is how much more respect for reason and argument you have than the religionists. Another example: The argument about abolition from slavery isn't taught regularly as part of a living tradition of thought, like the isms of a philosophy department parade around pretending to be. We don't rehearse the old arguments, so we fumble around with the new ones.

That's what the philosophers are good at—the vicissitudes of long chains of argument over long periods of time. Historians do what they can, but the history of belles lettres and political writing, if transferred as live traditions needing an understanding of their own distinct histories, would revitalize both literature and philosophy departments. "Theory" *should've* done this, but it didn't because it did not self-consciously connect itself to what the 19th century called "humane letters." Departments like African-American Studies and Women's Studies *are* examples—great examples—of places that do this kind of much-needed work, but *not* because of the birth of theory in the 60s. They do it because they teach the past, the historical line of writers about race and gender. I remember my first encounters with

Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin, in the same course with Jean Toomer and June Jordan—it was electric and we would only gain by syncing them up into larger webs of these conversations. I want Douglass in that context, as well as in the context of abolitionists, like Emerson, Garrison, and Stowe, and major American 19th-century writers, like Emerson, Dickinson, and Melville, and major American political critics, like Thoreau, Mary McCarthy and Baldwin.

Maybe what I'm really mad about are philosophy departments. I can imagine all of those classes being taught, but what I really seem to want is a class with Kant, Hegel, Douglass, Mill, and Ellison, or some such monstrous rewriting of the philosophical canon. But why not? They should be teaching moral and political philosophy that links more steadily up to the peculiar problems of this American democracy. When race is treated like a blood disease—the so-called one-drop rule—it becomes caste, a metaphysical pollutant needing a religious response. And so such religious responses, i.e. the irrational racist fears, need arguments against religious metaphysics—these were the arguments honed in the 19th century. Intellectuals often were struggling to make science safe from religion, but politics and morality were shaking themselves from religion in that century as well. What could be more philosophical than metaphysics? Or, why do we not learn about the history of argument about slavery or women or voting access in an American moral philosophy course? What could be more central to questions of democratic morality? Likewise, what *does* get discussed in moral philosophy classes *does* help in parsing and considering abstract, intellectual questions, in shaping our understanding of issues. Being able to describe the moral landscape under slavery and Jim Crow as a Hobbesian nightmare is helpful in grasping the import of what Douglass's *Autobiography* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* present to us.



“Moods”

Out upon it: I have loved
Three whole days together;
And am like to love three more,
If it prove fair weather.

Time shall moult away his wings
Ere he shall discover
In the whole wide world again
Such a constant lover.

But the spite on't is, no praise
Is due at all to me:
Love with me had made no stays,
Had it any been but she.

Had it any been but she,
And that very face,
There had been at least ere this
A dozen dozen in her place.

— John Suckling



Bowen, II: Textbooks

2. One of the reasons I find Bowen interesting is that I am interested in how philosophy has been taught, and the professionalization of disciplines and the birth of the modern university, more broadly. A. O. Lovejoy is a useful figure to know about in the professionalization of philosophy, but the story has to go back to Bowen, who lived through the transition from small colleges based more on the English model of Oxford and Cambridge, to the “modern university,” with its doctorates and dissertations, based on the German model. Kuklick has very interesting things to say about, say, Bowen’s struggle against the use of textbooks, or the tediousness of lecturing, things we’ve just gotten used to now. All of this was in flux in the 19th century.

I’ve started collecting two kinds of textbooks because of my interest in how students are taught by the professional academics that have been conferred the authority of “knowledge.” Especially as our history with “higher learning” lengthens, and our struggle over education and history and living in a shared world with a shared reality has sharpened, I’ve wanted a better sense of what people are actually receiving as the “standard wisdom” about the past or whathaveyou. Instructors in the humanities obviously have to rely on some baseline knowledge, and so maybe rely on their vague memories of how they are taught. Especially on the academic left, too, an extremely potent and easily-reached-for framing-device is “For years, X has been taught as Y, but we now know...,” yet when it’s framed in terms of “the public,” as opposed to one’s own profession, rarely do I see any evidence offered for *how* the public has come to know this false view. It makes me

wonder if we rely a little too often on our vague memories when we can make these assertions more precise.

For this reason I've started collecting history textbooks, especially, and the anthologies of primary texts used in courses. Watching the transformation of how the story of the United States is told is fascinating, for example, from the successive editions of the Richard Hofstadter collegiate textbook to the successive editions of the Bailyn-Wood textbook, and then the Eric Foner textbook, all heavyweight historians of different generations. One can see how certain sections become solidified as standard parts of the broader account, like how one can imagine historians going, "And now I need to have a section on the Transcendentalists." One can see how certain stories are told differently when moved into different positions in the broader story, how changes in the profession have opened up new sections, and let go of others, or how such changes occur in response to changes in the broader culture. The little vibrations of variation between successive editions by the same authors is particularly revealing sometimes as one can link them to specific changes in the culture or profession sometimes.

I like even more, though, the anthologies. These standardize one's understanding of a profession or genre or tradition. Hofstadter conducted a number of "Documents of the" textbooks into print. Foner has them to go with his textbook. The Hollinger-Capper textbook on American intellectual history, *The American Intellectual Tradition*, is a must-have; Jerome Schneewind's anthology on the history of moral philosophy from Montaigne to Kant is brilliant and dovetails with his monumental history from the Protestant Reformation to Kant, *The Invention of Autonomy* (1998). Richard McKeon's *Selections of the Medieval Philosophers* (1929) really should be put back into print simply for his massively useful glossary of Greek and Latin philosophical terms, considering nobody studies those languages regularly anymore and knowing the etymology of philosophical terms is the beginning of wisdom in philosophy. Perry Miller's anthology *The Puritans* (1956) hasn't been replaced yet, and his one on the Transcendentalists is still well worth having even if one gets the more recent and inclusive one by Lawrence Buell (2006). In the successive headnotes to Miller's *The Transcendentalists* (1950), he tells a detailed story of the rise of Transcendentalism and the roles of its members, one landmark at a time, with many gems from the literary journals that make up the era's magazine culture.

As I've tracked Transcendentalism out of its origins in New England Unitarianism, I've come to appreciate better how the evolution of

Christianity can sometimes shed light on the contemporary scene. Unlike biological evolution, cultural evolution can be reversed. When we are caused to choose between beliefs, to alter our minds in some manner as a response to life, it is the same as choosing a mate, choosing a genetic future. Beliefs give birth to actions and further beliefs. But as beliefs cause consequences, to both the lives we live guided by those beliefs and our other beliefs that sometimes conflict in their guidance, we can revisit earlier choices, choose new evolutionary futures. The New England Puritans, for example, are said to have given America some of its cultural impulses, most importantly a stress on the individual and the individual's innate depravity. But John Milton was something of a Puritan, and he gave democracy one of its most important flags to rally around, already alluded to: truth will win out in a free and open encounter. The 17th century Puritan Revolution in Britain is identified with a democratic impulse. But does the American Left even remember how long it had been rebelling against Puritanism? What does it mean for us that we don't? The object of Emerson's and the Left's rebellion was innate depravity—improving yourself or the world didn't make sense otherwise. But now, if we remember the Puritans at all, the emphasis would be on rejecting their navel-gazing individualism. The American Left also tends to be unreligious, and it doesn't talk so much about the Wars of Religion that used to play such an important role in telling the story of the American experiment in democracy. If those three things are true, how do they change the dynamics in our ongoing arguments, both cultural and political? I don't have a conclusion, but my instinct is to say that we're forgetting something important. It can't be the importance of the freedom of religion, for the unreligious point to that one as much if not more than anyone else. So what is it? What happened?



'Nobody writes like Emerson anymore.' It sounds true, but has anyone?



"Witch-Wife"

She is neither pink nor pale,
And she never will be all mine;
She learned her hands in a fairy-tale,
And her mouth on a valentine.

She has more hair than she needs;
In the sun 'tis a woe to me!
And her voice is a string of colored beads,
Or steps leading into the sea.

She loves me all that she can,
And her ways to my ways resign;
But she was not made for any man,
And she never will be all mine.

— Edna St. Vincent Millay



Sermon: Leading a Bookish Life

When we first got to grad school, my cohort was treated to a pep talk by my future dissertation advisor, one I have heard he repeated several times around those years to incoming grad students. He was only three or four years removed from Berkeley and was full of stories about friends who were iced out of the academy. Almost everyone in the department was rumbling about how difficult it was going to be for us to get jobs, but he had the freshest dead letters. Many involved crises of self-image: you spend your whole life in school, and now school says, ‘Please leave; we don’t want you here anymore.’ If we’re not doing schoolwork—for that’s all academic writing is—who are we?

The moral is a sound one: do not wrap your self-image up in academics. It’s sound for anyone: have more in the mirror to look at than your job. Academics is today what Emerson called the “cold formalism” of preaching of the 19th century. The best writing that gets published in academic journals is *not* academic writing—that’s what makes it good. Academic writing can be useful, and I don’t really want to yuck anyone’s yum. Enjoy what you enjoy; that’s the point. But if I had to guess, academic writing leeches out your soul. It can be good and clear and useful, but meaningful writing occurs when you’re in conversation with yourself, even if you’re attempting to write something useful to others. It’s the difference between a good close reading, and the “summary and analysis” junk that clutters the internet and throws sand in the gears of our attempt to help others to a love of words.

If you're not a hard worker, like me, you learn a lot about yourself and what you really enjoy in grad school. I equate hard work with discipline, with doing what you don't want to do for a reward other than itself. Duties, obligations, and responsibilities require hard work, but I've never felt obliged to read and write what I read and write. From the point of view of my grad school, it was simply a waste of time to read and take copious notes on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* the first year of my dissertation, or read Robert Brandom's monster, 700-page treatise on language twice during the program. They were not ever going to help me get a job, which is the point of grad school, professionally considered. I wrote the dissertation I wanted to write, not the kind that the profession was looking for.

The best academics are able to play both games, are able to get tenure and not lose their souls. Inveighing against academic writing can sound an awful lot like sour grapes from me. God bless those hard workers, and I hope they inspire their students. I admire people able to do both, like my mother-in-law. When she talks about her dissertation, she regrets having to slant it toward her advisor's preferences, but she got a good job, and was able to lead a good life because of it. She has no regrets there. The confusion we should be wary of, though, is equating an academic life with a bookish life. If you find yourself in a crisis after filtering out of academia, then it might be you've forgotten what it means to love a book and to discuss it with others. That's the flame worth fanning.



Sometimes
Like a branch the pathbreaker
let lash backwards, careless
in his breathless forward press

a suddenly green
memory of you comes springing back
to slap me, to poke me
in the fucking eye

— Jane Kundert



Quine says that a “logical truth” is an “absolutely demonstrable truth” *if you understand the language*—that's why, as he puts it, to understand it is to believe it. Cute, but I understand the Bible perfectly well.

From the Archive: North American Review, October 1848

The following is an unsigned review. During Francis Bowen's editorship of the *North American Review*, he wrote many of the review-essays, all of which are unsigned. I do not think this is Bowen—I don't think Bowen is as funny, intentionally or ironically (for the following is hilarious both by design and in its conservative values). And, in fact, there is a funny review of a new edition of Shakespeare in the previous issue—does Bowen have someone new on staff? James Russell Lowell can be funny—is it him? I can't imagine Lowell having the opinions expressed in the attack on the "idolatry of Shakspeare," though—or do I not know Lowell well enough? Could it be Whipple? *However it is*—this includes reviews of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Vanity Fair*, so I include those parts as having the greatest chance of entertainment.

Art. IV.—1. *Jane Eyre*, an Autobiography. Edited by Currer Bell. Boston: Wilkins, Carter, & Co. 1848. 12mo.

2. *Wuthering Heights*. By the Author of *Jane Eyre*. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1848. 2 vols. 12mo.

3. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. By Acton Bell, Author of *Wuthering Heights*. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1848. 2vols. 12mo.

4. *Hawkstone: a Tale of and for England in 184-*. Fifth American Edition. New York: Stanford & Swords. 1848. 2 vols. 12mo.

5. *The Bachelor of the Albany*. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1848. 12mo.

6. *Harold, the Last of the Saxon Kings*. By Sir E. Bulwer Lytton, Bart. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1848. 8vo.

7. *Grantley Manor, a Tale*. By Lady Georgiana Fullerton. New York: D. Appleton & Co. 1848. 12mo.

8. *Vanity Fair, a Novel without a Hero*. By William Makepeace Thackeray. With Illustrations by the Author. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1848. 8vo.

THERE was a time when the appearance of a clever novel would justify its separate examination in a Review, and a nice discussion of the claims of its Mr. Herbert or Lady Jane to be enrolled among men and women. But in this age of ready writers, romances must be reviewed in battalions, or allowed to pass unchallenged. Every week beholds a new irruption of

emigrants into the sunny land of fiction, sadly disturbing the old balance of power, and introducing a fearful confusion of names and habits. Within a few years, all the proprieties of the domain have been violated by the intrusion of hordes of ruffians, pickpockets, and vagabonds. Sir Charles Grandison finds himself face to face with Jack Sheppard, and no scorn sparkling in the eyes of Die Vernon can abash the impudence of Mr. Richard Turpin. The swagger of vulgar villany, the lisp of genteel imbecility, and the free and easy manner of Wapping, are now quite the rage in the Elysian fields of romance. Another evil is the comparative absence of individualities, amid all the increase of population. Opinions have nearly supplanted characters. We look for men, and discern propositions,—for women, and are favored with woman's rights. Theologians, metaphysicians, politicians, reformers, philanthropists, prophets of the general overturn and the good time coming, the march-of-intellect boys in a solid phalanx, have nearly pushed the novelist aside. The dear old nonsense, which has delighted the heart for so many centuries, is so mixed up with nonsense of another kind, that it cannot be recognized either in drawing-room or kitchen. The sacred flame still burns in some sixpenny or ninepenny novellettes, the horror of the polite and the last hope of the sentimental; but it burns in a battered copper lamp, and among ruins.

Accordingly, in the novels whose titles grace the head of the present article, our readers must not expect to find, in its full perfection, that peculiar aspect of human weakness of which the novelist is the legitimate exponent. They must be content with a repast of matters and things in general, among which may be named some good philosophy, several dishes of controversial theology, much spicy satire, a little passable morality, a little impertinent immorality, and a good deal of the philosophy of history and the science of the affections.

The first three novels on our list are those which have proceeded from the firm of Bell & Co. Not many months ago, the New England States were visited by a distressing mental epidemic, passing under the name of the "Jane Eyre fever," which defied all the usual nostrums of the established doctors of criticism. Its effects varied with different constitutions, in some producing a soft ethical sentimentality, which relaxed all the fibres of conscience, and in others exciting a general fever of moral and religious indignation. It was to no purpose that the public were solemnly assured, through the intelligent press, that the malady was not likely to have any permanent effect either on the intellectual or moral constitution. The book which caused the distemper would probably have been inoffensive, had not some sly manufacturer of mischief hinted that it was a book which no

respectable man should bring into his family circle. Of course, every family soon had a copy of it, and one edition after another found eager purchasers. The hero, Mr. Rochester, (not the same person who comes to so edifying an end in the pages of Dr. Gilbert Burnet,) became a great favorite in the boarding schools and in the worshipful society of governesses. That portion of Young America known as ladies' men began to swagger and swear in the presence of the gentler sex, and to allude darkly to events in their lives which excused impudence and profanity.

While fathers and mothers were much distressed at this strange conduct of their innocents, and with a pardonable despair were looking for the dissolution of all the bonds of society, the publishers of *Jane Eyre* announced *Wuthering Heights*, by the same author. When it came, it was purchased and read with universal eagerness; but, alas! it created disappointment almost as universal. It was a panacea for all the sufferers under the epidemic. Society returned to its old condition, parents were blessed in hearing once more their children talk common sense, and rakes and battered profligates of high and low degree fell instantly to their proper level. Thus ended the last desperate attempt to corrupt the virtue of the sturdy descendants of the Puritans.

The novel of *Jane Eyre*, which caused this great excitement, purports to have been edited by Currer Bell, and the said Currer divides the authorship, if we are not misinformed, with a brother and sister. The work bears the marks of more than one mind and one sex, and has more variety than either of the novels which claim to have been written by Acton Bell. The family mind is strikingly peculiar, giving a strong impression of unity, but it is still male and female. From the masculine tone of *Jane Eyre*, it might pass altogether as the composition of a man, were it not for some unconscious feminine peculiarities, which the strongest-minded woman that ever aspired after manhood cannot suppress. These peculiarities refer not only to elaborate descriptions of dress, and the minutia of the sick-chamber, but to various superficial refinements of feeling in regard to the external relations of the sex. It is true that the noblest and best representations of female character have been produced by men; but there are niceties of thought and emotion in a woman's mind which no man can delineate, but which often escape unawares from a female writer. There are numerous examples of these in *Jane Eyre*. The leading characteristic of the novel, however, and the secret of its charm, is the clear, distinct, decisive style of its representation of character, manners, and scenery; and this continually suggests a male mind. In the earlier chapters, there is little, perhaps, to break the impression that we are reading the autobiography of a powerful and peculiar female

intellect; but when the admirable Mr. Rochester appears, and the profanity, brutality, and slang of the misanthropic profligate give their torpedo shocks to the nervous system,—and especially when we are favored with more than one scene given to the exhibition of mere animal appetite, and to courtship after the manner of kangaroos and the heroes of Dryden's plays,—we are gallant enough to detect the hand of a gentleman in the composition. There are also scenes of passion, so hot, emphatic, and condensed in expression, and so sternly masculine in feeling, that we are almost sure we observe the mind of the author of *Wuthering Heights* at work in the text.

The popularity of *Jane Eyre* was doubtless due in part to the freshness, raciness, and vigor of mind it evinced; but it was obtained not so much by these qualities as by frequent dealings in moral paradox, and by the hardihood of its assaults upon the prejudices of proper people. Nothing causes more delight, at least to one third of every community, than a successful attempt to wound the delicacy of their scrupulous neighbours, and a daring peep into regions which acknowledge the authority of no conventional rules. . . .

This is especially the case with Acton Bell, the author of *Wuthering Heights*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and, if we mistake not, of certain offensive but powerful portions of *Jane Eyre*. Acton, when left altogether to his own imaginations, seems to take a morose satisfaction in developing a full and complete science of human brutality. In *Wuthering Heights* he has succeeded in reaching the summit of this laudable ambition. He appears to think that spiritual wickedness is a combination of animal ferocities, and has accordingly made a compendium of the most striking qualities of tiger, wolf, cur, and wild-cat, in the hope of framing out of such elements a suitable brute-demon to serve as the hero of his novel. Compared with Heathcote, Squeers is considerate and Quilp humane. He is a deformed monster, whom the Mephistopheles of Goethe would have nothing to say to, whom the Satan of Milton would consider as an object of simple disgust, and to whom Dante would hesitate in awarding the honor of a place among those whom he has consigned to the burning pitch. This epitome of brutality, disavowed by man and devil, Mr. Acton Bell attempts in two whole volumes to delineate, and certainly he is to be congratulated on his success. As he is a man of uncommon talents, it is needless to say that it is to his subject and his dogged manner of handling it that we are to refer the burst of dislike with which the novel was received. His mode of delineating a bad character is to narrate every offensive act and repeat every vile expression which are characteristic. Hence, in *Wuthering Heights*, he details all the ingenuities of animal malignity, and exhausts the whole rhetoric of stupid blasphemy, in

order that there may be no mistake as to the kind of person he intends to hold up to the popular gaze. Like all spendthrifts of malice and profanity, however, he overdoes the business. Though he scatters oaths as plentifully as sentimental writers do interjections, the comparative parsimony of the great novelists in this respect is productive of infinitely more effect. It must be confessed that this coarseness, though the prominent, is not the only characteristic of the writer. His attempt at originality does not stop with the conception of Heathcote, but he aims further to exhibit the action of the sentiment of love on the nature of the being whom his morbid imagination has created. This is by far the ablest and most subtle portion of his labors, and indicates that strong hold upon the elements of character, and that decision of touch in the delineation of the most evanescent qualities of emotion, which distinguish the mind of the whole family. For all practical purposes, however, the power evinced in *Wuthering Heights* is power thrown away. Nightmares and dreams, through which devils dance and wolves howl, make bad novels. . . .

Vanity Fair, by W. M. Thackeray, one of the most brilliant of English magazine-writers, is an attempt, somewhat after the manner of Fielding, to represent the world as it is, especially the selfish, heartless, and cunning portion it. The author has Fielding's cosy manner of talking to his readers in the pauses of his narrative, and, like Fielding, takes his personages mostly from ordinary life. The novel, though it touches often upon topics which have been worn threadbare, and reproduces many commonplace types of character, is still, on the whole, a fresh and vigorous transcript of English life, and has numerous profound touches of humanity and humor. Sir Pitt Crawley, a sort of combination of Sir John Brute, Sir Tunbelly Clumsy, and Squire Western, is a very striking piece of caricature; but though exceedingly ludicrous, is hardly natural. George Osborne, Dobbin, and Amelia are characters almost literally true to nature, and are developed with consummate skill and fidelity. Mr. Osborne, we fear, is too fair a representative of the English man of business of the middle class, — selfish, arrogant, purse-proud, cringing to superiors, and ferocious to inferiors, rejoicing in a most profound ignorance of his own meanness and cruelty, and ever disposed to rise on the ruin of his neighbours. That disposition in English society, of every class, to trample on the one immediately beneath it, and to fawn on the one immediately above it, Thackeray felicitously represents in this portrait and in other characters. Nothing can be more edifying than Mr. Osborne's conversations with his son George, on his intimacy with men of rank who fleece him at cards, and on his duty to break off a match with Amelia after her father has become bankrupt. But the finest

character in the whole novel is Miss Rebecca Sharp, an original personage, worthy to be called the author's own, and as true to life as hypocrisy, ability, and cunning can make her. She is altogether the most important person in the work, being the very impersonation of talent, tact, and worldliness, and one who works her way with a graceful and effective impudence unparalleled among managing women.

Of all the novels on our list, *Vanity Fair* is the only one in which the author is content to represent actual life. His page swarms with personages whom we recognize at once as genuine. It is also noticeable, that Thackeray alone preserves himself from the illusions of misanthropy or sentimentality, and though dealing with a host of selfish and malicious characters, his book leaves no impression that the world is past praying for, or that the profligate have it. His novel, as a representation of life, is altogether more comprehensive and satisfying than either of the others. Each may excel him in some particular department of character and passion, but each is confined to a narrow space, and discolours or shuts out the other portions of existence. Thackeray looks at the world from no exclusive position, and his view accordingly includes a superficial, if not a substantial whole; and it is creditable to the healthiness of his mind, that he could make so wide a survey without contracting either of the opposite diseases of misanthropy or worldliness. His book is adorned, after a fashion which is common among the novelists of his class, with illustrations designed by the author himself; but so far as we can judge of these from the engraved copies of them in the American edition, they do him no honor as an artist. They are stiff and witless caricatures.



It was then past midnight. The cottages were all dark. A single faint light gleamed out from the hallway of the house. There was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl in the wop of a water-oak, and the everlasting voice of the sea, that was not uplifted at that soft hour. It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night.

The tears came so fast to Mrs. Pontellier's eyes that the damp sleeve of her *peignoir* no longer served to dry them. . . . She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood.

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was just having a good cry all to herself. The mosquitoes made merry over her, biting her firm, round arms and nipping at her bare insteps. . . .

She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself. . . .

The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water. . . .

The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. . . .

"Good-by—because I love you." He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand. . . .

She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air.

——— Chopin, *The Awakening*, Chs. 3, 10, 39



Bowen, III: Tradition

3. I recently picked up a remnant of Bowen's scholarly production that speaks to the practical transmission of traditions of thought: *Documents of the Constitution of England and America, from Magna Charta to the*

Federal Constitution of 1789. If you remember learning about the Magna Carta in World History class, and probably then again in U.S. History, I bet the reason we did is in part because of Bowen. The treating of certain texts as politically “sacred” most definitely has a history, and lately that history has become even more important. In part, this owes to the revaluation of our American past and its texts spurred especially on by the post-Civil Rights era of multiculturalism, though the unveiling of texts as having ideological angles, edges, and exclusions goes back at least to the post-Marx era that gave us Charles Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*. The Left has been doing a lot of unmasking and debunking.

What’s interesting about Bowen’s introduction to his textbook is how Bowen shows himself to be a Burkean conservative, which vaunts the common-law model of experiential evolution. Burke was horrified by the French Revolution because it reified principles, essentially using them as fulcrums to overturn the world. The Burkean conservative now looks almost progressive in the face of the Conservative Legal Movement’s effacement of *stare decisis*. By rejecting tradition in favor of the correct interpretation of original principles, they are abdicating the defining trait of *why* it’s called *conservative*—the hope to conserve the past. Tradition isn’t a single point in time, so why should tradition *end* at a single point in time, as originalism suggests? Harold Bloom’s assertion in the ‘90s, as the Right in America increasingly attacked the institutions of education, that what Emerson called the Party of Hope, America’s Left, is now also the Party of Memory, seems even more true today.

What’s even more interesting to me is how *broad* Bowen effectively treats the concept of tradition that is implicit in his understanding of what the federal constitution means:

The word *Constitution*, in its largest sense, properly signifies the aggregate of those fundamental laws, institutions, and usages, which make up the whole polity of a state. It is too extensive, therefore, to be accurately described and defined in a single written instrument; a great portion of it is unwritten, forming a body of consuetudinary law, which is equally valid with those other portions that have been specially recognized and enacted, or re-enacted rather, by the supreme legislature.

There goes originalism! The very idea of a sacred text is not only exploded but displaced into the democratic body politic with that rare word *consuetudinary*, our customs or what Tocqueville called *mœurs*. On Bowen’s view of things, the laws of the land are not just the implicit result of judicial decisions—the ideal of “common law”—but merely the explicitation of the implicit law embodied by our behavior, our habits. And one central behavior is voting in people to make laws. This makes the law political in a way it usually wishes to repress, but is really just the same as lawyers having

a responsibility to their client, or philosophers to the Truth, or politicians to their constituency. One is responsible to something other than oneself, other than one's own will and desire. Lawyers and judges are responsible for interpreting the application of these explicitations of our behavior, and Bowen seems to endorse an expansive sense of what those interpretations should be judged by—certainly not *just* the text of those explicit laws. But that there is a *correct* interpretation seems to go by the wayside since the law lives by remaining relevant to current behavior, not simply the behavior of when it was codified, or “re-enacted,” in Bowen's significant term. If rulings did not account for current experience, their words would be, properly, *dead usages*, words that might have meant something once but mean nothing to us now. The line between what is dead and living in our behavior, however, becomes just one more location where political struggle occurs.

On Bowen's understanding, it does look depressingly like politics all the way down. The struggle over statutory law begins as a struggle over culture. Liberal democracy was supposed to have a civic culture of tolerance for the purpose of avoiding a tyranny of the majority, persecuting others for their taste in private matters. But the struggle over just where to draw the line between private and public spheres, just as between dead and living, is itself a cultural struggle, one the Friends of Tolerance have been losing. It's not hard to read the polarization of late as a loss on both sides (though not *nearly* to an equal degree) to the Enemies of Tolerance. Where we require moral action, it is *ipso facto* a loss—the US did finally cease tolerating slavery, after all. But I remember being taught in some freshman Religious Studies courses that scholars of religion have flirted with classifying Marxism as a religion, since it teaches a totalizing system of values. But then that would make *secular humanism* one, too, the fancy name I've heard for the religion of tolerance. The real line is not between the religious and the secular, but Ecumenicism and Evangelicalism. Religious evangelists must be civic ecumenicists or else they cannot be tolerated in a liberal democracy. But, just like all the others, this is contested territory, too—Where is the line between Church and State? When is a law preferential to a religion or simply protecting its free expression? How can we tell the difference between a threat to democracy or a defense? Different cats in different bags, but they all seem out.



Ambivalent Fortune Cookie / Warning to Heretical Prophets

Catch on fire with enthusiasm
and people will come for miles to
watch you burn.

A word then, (for I will conquer it,)
The word final, superior to all,
Subtle, sent up—what is it?—I listen;
Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-waves?
Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,
And again death, death, death, death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd child's heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
Death, death, death, death, death.

Which I do not forget,
But fuse the song of my dusky demon and brother,
That he sang to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's gray beach,
With the thousand responsive songs at random,
My own songs awakened from that hour,
And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
(Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments,
bending aside,)
The sea whisper'd me.

— Whitman, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"



Emerson and Public Intellectuals

Lawrence Buell calls Emerson "the first public intellectual in the history of the United States." I have always wanted for this to be true, too, but even Buell knows qualification is needed. (Perhaps, the first to achieve "international standing," as he later says, but that, too, needs qualification, since Jefferson was an internationally respected intellectual, and what is the *Federalist* but the writing of a public intellectual?) Emerson is merely the

biggest public-intellectual light of his generation. For an intellectual needs a public *of other intellectuals*, needs the friction for the spark, and Emerson's era is full of specimens of various stature, though none ultimately flamed so bright.

So let's ask an intellectual question: what is a "public intellectual"? Let's say this—an "intellectual" is someone that reasons and thinks in the abstract about topics of interest. Think: "being intellectual about X"—not all people who talk about politics are intellectual, just as one could be intellectual about sports. With "public" we face two choices—a weak interpretation and a strong. The weak sense of "public intellectual" might be anyone who reasons and thinks about topics of interest with *a public*. This sense just reminds us that for every intellectual act we should think of what audience it was aimed at. What is usually wanted is something stronger, something more like, *reasons and thinks about topics with **the whole public***. "Demos" means "people," so this would be a democratic public. This kind of public is very different because of how large and varied it is almost certain to be.

The interesting question for American history isn't 'Who is the first public intellectual?' but 'When was a democratic public created for intellectuals?' Jefferson and Madison might not count as public intellectuals because they wrote for the small coterie of themselves and other elite movers and shakers. Gordon S. Wood calls this part of a "moral revolution," one the elites were a bit shocked and taken aback by. In a democracy, if one is to have more than the dissemination of propaganda and marching orders in the guise of "information," public dialogues must be conducted. The bigger the *demos*, though, the harder this is to do. Like with the government itself, the simplest way to solve the problem is by representation, by proxy: some people's views count more than others. Some smaller slice of people do the public dialoguing, the debate about issues. A panelist's views on MSNBC or Fox, or a writer's in *National Review* or *The Nation*, is likely to count more in the end than any view in this journal for fairly obvious reasons. Ideally, these mediums would *model* good debate and inquiry into the issues before a political *demos*. I'm sure one could argue that Jefferson and Madison were modeling in some capacity, but at the beginning of American democracy, the early condition of American society and law—with American plebs having a natural (because almost all of history taught them to do this) deference to their betters, on the one hand, and on the other, those so-called betters making rules about who could change the rules (slavery, voting restrictions, divided government, the Senate)—helped to keep the relevant *demos* in politics small.

At first. Just like today, I imagine many people didn't know what these betters were up to in Washington, but simply listened and were motivated by the propaganda the betters used to get them to bleed for the new nation. "All men were created equal." What Tocqueville records in *Democracy in America* is that the people began acting like it. "The Striking Characteristic," Tocqueville absurdly titles one of his sections, "of the Social Condition of the Anglo-Americans Is Its Essential Democracy." And to some credit, some of the founding elites were ambivalent about their elitism. But some of what happened, namely the material conditions of life in America, was out of their control. Staples of the 18th century like broadsides and pamphleteering were limited to those with access, but that access was widening as print mediums, like the broadsheet newspaper and the penny daily, developed in the 19th century. Educational institutions, too, began to develop as reformers understood that a democratic people would need to understand the stakes of their voting choices. Jefferson spoke of a "natural aristocracy" in this connection, the kind of thing we should promote with good universities. Public discussion broadened: social clubs were formed, lending libraries created, lecture circuits built, newspapers and magazines proliferated. People began arguing with each other in these mediums. I think Emerson was an original, but like Shakespeare, he was not the only one doing what he was doing. An entire industry of mediums like literary journals and lecture circuits had to exist that could support what Emerson produced. Emerson is remembered for his books, not for his life in literary journalism or lectures (which is how he paid his bills), but people bought his books and went to his lectures because they saw them advertised in literary journals, magazines, and newspapers.

While people like Emerson wrote and performed for mass audiences—especially in the modes of magazine, lecture, and address—they also self-consciously wrote for other people like them, the people who produced those magazines and orations. And in this regard, it is significant that the origin of some of the publishing organs, like *The Monthly Anthology* or *The Dial*, lay in social clubs, groups of friends, or at least friendly acquaintances, who got together to have lively conversation. Intellectual circles are best as social circles. Public intellectuals were all over the place by Emerson's time, in the 1830s, writing for each other, reaching each other through existing organs, like *The Christian Register* or *North American Review*, or starting up their own, like the *Western Messenger*, founded by Bostonians who had moved to Ohio, or the *Dial*, by Bostonians frozen out of *The Christian Register* and *North American Review*, or the *Boston Quarterly Review*, written by a single Bostonian.

Emerson wasn't America's first public intellectual, but he might be its first and most enduring emblem of the public intellectual. "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion," he says; "it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." As someone that has pretty 'Ya *basic!*' political views, I appreciate my stable of ideologues on the left that I listen to for good, basic sense. But just like Emerson would always say, one really does notice a thinker of real independence when they appear. They are rare.



Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever!

——— Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Ch. 94, "A Squeeze of the Hand"



"If the bobolink and mockingbird find no poet to sing them, they can afford, like Kepler, to wait; and in the meantime they themselves will sing as if nothing had happened. For ourselves, we confess, we have hopes. The breed of poets is not extinct, nor has Apollo shot away all the golden, singing arrows in his quiver. We have a very strong persuasion, amounting even to faith, that eyes and ears will yet open on this Western Continent, and find adequate utterance. If some of our birds have a right to feel neglected, yet other parts of our natural history have met with due civility; and if the pine tree complain of the tribute which Emerson has paid it, we surrender it to the lumberer and the saw-mill without remorse. It must be an unreasonable tree, wooden at head and heart." — *North American Review*, July 1849



Wait, wait, wait—you're telling me Joe Biden is *old*?? 🤔

Touchstones: Rorty and Large Criticism

Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macauley and Carlyle and Emerson, a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all these things mingled together into a new genre. This genre is often still called “literary criticism,” however, for an excellent reason. The reason is that in the course of the nineteenth century imaginative literature took the place of both religion and philosophy in forming and solacing the agonized conscience of the young. Novels and poems are now the principal means by which a bright youth gains a self-image. Criticism of novels is the principal form in which the acquisition of a moral character is made articulate. We live in a culture in which putting one’s moral sensitivity into words is not clearly distinguishable from exhibiting one’s literary sensibilities What culture criticism does *not* do is to ask whether Valéry wrote more beautiful lines than Marlowe, or whether Hobbes or Moore told more truths about the good. In this form of life, the truth and the good and the beautiful drop out. The aim is to understand, not to judge. The hope is that if one understands enough poems, enough religions, enough societies, enough philosophies, one will have made oneself into something worth one’s own understanding.

—— Richard Rorty, “Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendentalist Culture,” 1976

Emerson in his (now non-canonical) “Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England” called Rorty’s mixed genre “large criticism,” thinking of in particular review-essays on Milton and Napoleon by William Ellery Channing, and *The Edinburgh Review*, the famed British critical quarterly read and imitated in New England’s burgeoning magazine industry of the early 19th century. Before remarking on some of the qualifications we might make, and changes in historical situation between Rorty’s time and ours, I want to expatiate on an important aspect. Implicit in Rorty’s description is the creation of a genre whose central purpose is the generation of a self-image in order to *have* a self-image. Rorty identifies “highbrow culture” and the “literary intellectual” as creators and consumers of this genre, the kind of writers and readers that surrounded, for example, *The Christian Examiner* and *The Dial* in the 19th century, and *The New York Review of Books* and *Raritan* today. Part of this genre for Rorty is telling oneself “a great sweeping story,” one that might appear “‘unscientific’ and ‘unscholarly,’” but that “also form[s] a genre of writing which is quite indispensable. Besides the need to ask whether certain propositions asserted by Aristotle or Locke or Kant or Kierkegaard are true or were validly inferred, there is also the need to adopt an attitude towards such men, just as one must adopt an attitude towards Alcibiades and Euripides, Cromwell and Milton, Proust and Lenin.” For Rorty, the development of these attitudes into a self-image means binding

many of them together, making for oneself an *ethos* or character, so that they are not simply disparate, flyaway strands but large braids made to express some self-identified, common attitude. “One’s attitude towards Kant,” in Rorty’s example, cannot “be independent of one’s attitudes towards Wordsworth and Napoleon.” Rorty’s point is not that these attitudes *cannot* be independent, but that for them to be made part of one’s self-image they must be self-consciously bound together in some manner—if even merely to express that they are not related.

This is *one* important aspect to large criticism—others that are meaningful though distinguishable might include a tendency to provoke, to argue inconclusively or not at all, to develop readings of imaginative literature, to produce imaginative images or parables, to propound hopes, dreams, and aspirations, to turn willy-nilly from scholarship to autobiography to contemporary events, or from social to political to literary to cultural criticism. It also judges, when not understanding, and affirms the true, the good, and the beautiful, when not suspending their operation in our lives. Large criticism, as Rorty suggests in his first sentence, is a mixed genre, and as such, its compounds are endless and endlessly fertile. Rorty highlights novels and poems, but that’s accidental because of the 19th century and Rorty’s own upbringing. I can’t believe it was true even in the mid-70s that they were the “principal means” a “bright youth” gained their self-image. However it is, I think it is mainly important to remind ourselves that *everyone*, bright and dull, acquire self-images through particular media. Additionally, these media are mediated by mediators we call “critics,” or I should like to just call “intellectuals,” and the repetition marks how self-involved the genre can become. (Also, is every critic an intellectual? No. Is every intellectual a critic? No? I defer the point, if there be one.)

Calling this subject “literary criticism” makes more sense if we mean by “literature” what the 18th century meant: books. The era Rorty refers to was importantly a bookish culture, though it was not the first bookish culture, and we are once again invited to wonder about our current cultural environment and its proliferating media. What really flourished in a way it never had, I think, was a *magazine culture*. ‘What about newspapers?’ True enough! I think all we need to recognize is 1) the importance of reading to these three media and 2) the varying lengths of time required for 3) the reading and 4) the writing. Longer lengths require greater thinking, let’s say. So maybe we can say this: a newspaper culture is one that supports journalism, reportage on the daily events for the broader culture. A bookish culture is one that supports writing of great length that requires longer digestion. A magazine culture, we could then say, is one that supports a class

of reading and writing that translates the two into each other. In one direction, we get reportage on the books for the broader culture; in the other, we get writing on daily events that requires longer digestion.

I close with a hypothesis: a healthy magazine culture is necessary for a democracy. A newspaper culture alone would be one that disseminated information and pleasure easily, but wouldn't generate thinking. A bookish culture alone would be one that generated great thinking, but only for a few. I can think of many bookish-sans-newspaper cultures from the past—the Academy, Alexandria, Catholic monasteries—but none of the reverse, so maybe I can put the point this way: *1984* imagines a world that has a newspaper culture and a bookish culture, but no magazine culture. The Ministry of Truth produced official information and porn for the masses, and the Inner Party had its own internal conversation about what was really going on in the world and how to maintain it, something that I imagine would require a lot of thinking. What was absent was any kind of public conversation—this is what a magazine culture supports. A necessary ingredient, thus, is freedom, freedom of thought and inquiry. What Rorty ultimately means by a “transcendentalist culture,” I think, is one that prioritizes freedom of thought, those “Boston notions” that caused an upsurge in literary and critical quarterlies at the beginning of the 19th century in New England. It is that kind of priority in one's values that allows one to suspend concern for truth and the good long enough to understand a new, surprising idea that seems, on its surface, to be wrong and bad. Coleridge said the suspension of disbelief was necessary to fiction, and Keats called this a negative capability, but I should think both are ways of describing the virtues we need for a robust practice of listening. To really *hear* where others are coming from is *hard*, and something we might not always be capable of. But listening seems necessary for a democracy, not just the freedom to speak.



“Unfortunately, before we can have good criticism, it is necessary that we should have good critics; and this consummation seems only the farther off now that the business has grown into a profession and means of subsistence. Doubtless, the critic sets out with an ideal before him. His forereaching spirit shapes to itself designs of noble and gigantic proportions. Very early in life, he even conceives of reading the books he reviews.” — James Russell Lowell, *North American Review*, April 1848



Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile – the Winds –
To a Heart in port –
Done with the Compass –
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor – Tonight –
In Thee!

— Dickinson



Bowen, IV: Liberal Tradition

4. In his 1994, *Politics by Other Means*, David Bromwich enlisted Edmund Burke to articulate a liberal philosophy of tradition, one of the most remarkable appropriations I can think of. Everyone knows that Burke is the founder of modern conservatism...right? Bromwich also enlisted Michael Oakeshott, a 20th century British conservative, but this with earlier precedent—his one-time colleague at Princeton, Richard Rorty, had appropriated one of Oakeshott’s most famous lines, “poetry in the conversation of mankind,” to articulate the idea of a pragmatist epistemology as a continuing conversation about what is good, true, and beautiful, which is essentially what a liberal philosophy of tradition is. Rorty was constantly being called a crypto-conservative by Marxish intellectuals who thought his politics and philosophy wasn’t radical enough. And in 2018, another friend and one-time colleague of Rorty’s, Mark Edmundson, wrote a provocative essay, “A Left Conservative,” and suggested Bromwich as one these, and would have Rorty, I think, had he still been around. It didn’t convince me to start calling myself a conservative, by any means—I prefer speaking of a libertarian left—but the argument is persuasive.

The essence of the argument is that to be conservative, in Edmundson's sense, is to remember that humans can be pretty nasty to each other. Edmundson puts it in terms of having a view of human nature, but we needn't be so metaphysical. I figure people forget all the time, especially in times of hope, that we can suck. I can't imagine how a leftist doesn't get suckered into hoping for a better future from time to time. A good measure if you're conservative in Edmundson's sense—whether the label is galling or not—is Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." If you finish that story and go, "Wow, yeah—there's humanity for you," then you're a conservative. If you simply *cannot* imagine how people could anesthetize themselves to such cruelty as that in the story, or convince themselves it's justified, then you either become a leftist who hopes for the best, or of the right, who can't imagine people don't get what's coming to them. A liberal view of human nature is as basically decent, not basically nasty. A conservative's state of nature is Hobbesian, but a liberal's is Rousseauian. Rousseau talked too much as if society as a basic compromise for safe freedom was a raw deal, and that we'd have fewer chains if not for it. Hobbes had no such illusions, and assumed that but for it, we'd slit each other's throats. It's no coincidence that Bernard Yack identifies Rousseau as the source for a modern dream of revolutionary change, either of the polis or oneself, what he termed *The Longing for Total Revolution*. If all of society represents slavery, then only the total rejection of all that is could satisfy one's desire. But for someone that starts from Hobbesian premises, whatever society we have must be the fragile yet enormous result of people deciding *not* to totally reject each other and go for each other's throats—that's where we get Burke and Bowen's "body of consuetudinary law."

Our manners and mores have always played a fundamental role in the success of the democratic experiment, even if it sounded like such a surprise to everyone, during the Trump administration, how norm-governed, and not rule-bound, democratic governance was. Some on the left keep talking as if we could make it *less* norm-governed, and while there is certainly a role for making more precise what actually is involved in installing a new president, politics is ultimately norm-governed—if you don't care about the principle that gets you the predetermined result, but just want what you want, then no rule is going to get in your way from seizing power. Whatever remains of our basic hope that following the rules is enough, it will have to see us beyond the "flexibility," for example, of originalism in Samuel Alito or Clarence Thomas. Originalism as a methodology only makes sense as a rejection of other methods, but if you abandon your principles whenever it suits you, isn't that bad? Antonin Scalia, Godfather of originalism, sometimes complained

that he was drawn into a ruling his method required but he didn't like, but Alito has sided with the liberal justices but once in 17 years. What does it mean that conservative justices will do whatever they want because they have the causal power of statistics behind them, *the numbers*, and are not constrained by any sense of proportion, measure, mean, and prudence, let alone principle?

One insight Bromwich, especially, has alerted me to in writers as diverse as Burke and John Stuart Mill is that our manners and sentiments are educated in social venues. Mill, in his assault on the institution of marriage in *The Subjection of Women*, points out that an unequal marriage is a terrible teacher. Burke, in *Reflections on the French Revolution*, talks about the theater being "a better school of moral sentiments than churches, where the feelings of humanity are thus outraged." Outrage has a necessary role, but Burke would've had some harsh things to say about our current moral school, the internet. It has so obviously had an effect on our manners and mores, being schooled by this enragement machine. Equally troubling is the *superficiality* of the emotions. I recall hearing internet critic Max Fisher describe how, while the internet made possible extraordinary moments of mass protest, like the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and that whole host of ongoing outrages that produced Black Lives Matter, the replacement of the difficult work of grassroots organizing has made the *effects* of protest thin. Everyone shows up, and then disappears. Bowen's Burkean response to the French Revolution in his textbook is relevant:

In France . . . an attempt has been repeatedly made to sweep away every vestige of the old form of government, and, on the *tabula rasa* thus formed, to build up a polity entirely new, constructed on theoretical principles, and with due attention to artistic unity and symmetry of plan. But the result of each of these attempts has been a disastrous failure. So it must ever be. Institutions which have no root in the soil, no hold on the previous habits, associations, and affections of the people, will be prostrated by the first blast.

I don't know about "must ever be," but the thinning of social trust and good faith, the erosion of common institutions, the reliance on numbers instead of persuasion—it's not clear how many more blasts we can take.



"The Fire of Drift-Wood"

We sat within the farm-house old,
Whose windows, looking o'er the bay,
Gave to the sea-breeze, damp and cold,
An easy entrance, night and day.

Hymn

Not far away we saw the port,—
The strange, old-fashioned, silent town,—
The light-house,—the dismantled fort,—
The wooden houses, quaint and brown.

We sat and talked until the night,
Descending, filled the little room;
Our faces faded from the sight,
Our voices only broke the gloom.

We spake of many a vanished scene,
Of what we once had thought and said,
Of what had been, and might have been,
And who was changed, and who was dead;

And all that fills the hearts of friends,
When first they feel, with secret pain,
Their lives thenceforth have separate ends,
And never can be one again;

The first slight swerving of the heart,
That words are prowess to express,
And leave it still unsaid in part,
Or say it in too great excess.

The very tones in which we spake
Had something strange, I could but mark;
The leaves of memory seemed to make
A mournful rustling in the dark.

Oft died the words upon our lips,
As suddenly, from out the fire
Built of the wreck of stranded ships,
The flames would leap and then expire.

And, as their splendor flashed and failed,
We thought of wrecks upon the main,—
Of ships dismasted, that were hailed
And sent no answer back again.

The windows, rattling in their frames,—
The ocean, roaring up the beach,—
The gusty blast,—the bickering flames,—
All mingled vaguely in our speech;

Until they made themselves a part
Of fancies floating through the brain,—
The long-lost ventures of the heart,
That send no answers back again.

O flames that glowed! O hearts that yearned!
They were indeed too much akin,
The drift-wood fire without that burned,
The thoughts that burned and glowed within.

— Longfellow



Bowen, V: Critical Intellectuals

5. Since I started by buffeting philosophy departments for forgetting about Bowen, I'll close by boxing English departments. I was disappointed to find that Lawrence Buell's comprehensive *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance* (1986) did not include a single reference to him, though it did have several discussions of the *North American Review* under his editorship. The problem, in part, is a bias against what I will call the critical intellectual, following Buell's distinction between the "critical quarterlies" that flourished between 1800-1850, and "periodicals specializing in creative writing," which he describes as "belletistic" or "literary." Buell's aim in the book is to understand the culture behind the production of creative literature, which he understands only to include "poetry, fiction, drama, [and] literary prose." It's a very traditional list, and considering he deployed it to manage a statistical set—rather than argue a controversial and interesting point—I completely concede the right to cap the list of included writers with some definition. But the literary culture he then deals with cuts off the purely critical practitioners. A very traditional bias, surely, but his very interesting observation is that while tons of (narrowly defined) literary magazines tried to get off the ground in Boston between 1780 and 1850—the kinds of magazines that published poems and

fiction—nothing lasted long, whereas during this period the critical magazines—which by and large stuck to review-essays—dominated New England. Buell’s implication, I think, is that this stunted the growth of a literary community, which was “slow to coalesce,” but it also then produced the Transcendentalists, so...?

I prefer the more capacious sense of a “literary intellectual” as a “bookish thinker,” and not the narrower “thinker who writes verse or fiction or drama or literary prose.” Bowen thought, rightly, that he was part of New England literary culture, even though he was wrong about a lot of what was in it, especially Emerson and the Transcendentalists. But he was part of it. He even translated Virgil, and wrote a couple biographies. (Doesn’t Buell include historians like Parkman?) At any rate, Bowen’s last book was a collection of his large criticism he called, *Gleanings from a Literary Life, 1838-1880*. The title is probably the most sentimental thing he wrote in what can be very sharp and dry cultural criticism.

But the bias might be put this way: Buell only wanted to include writers whose primary purpose is aesthetic, or the production of beauty, not intellectual, or the production of truth. I get it—Bowen didn’t care about how pretty his writing was, so we might not include it as “literary prose,” though it would obviously be wrong to say that critical writing doesn’t have an *aesthetic*: clarity, precision, and concision, to name three virtues. (For the same reason it is wrong to say that scientific writing doesn’t have a pathos, a feeling to it: it strives, quite intentionally, *not* to call up emotion in the same way that one might try to move a person to tears.) Buell is well aware that distinctions between beauty and truth, aesthetic and intellect deal quite poorly with Emerson and the Transcendentalists generally, and they certainly have a very different aesthetic. He says in his earlier book, *Literary Transcendentalism*, that their “nonfictional literature” is “neither art nor argument, but a compound of both.” These he implicitly defines as *disciplines*, and exclaims that it’s the Transcendentalists’ “very lack of discipline” that is “a source of greatness.” Here, here! He calls the writers of these volatile mixtures of art and argument “thinkers” and “prophets,” but what is the worth of that thought or prophecy to someone who can say, “undoubtedly Emerson and his circle *are* more important for historical reasons rather than the quality of their achievements in art, philosophy, and theology” (emphasis Buell’s).

Buell *loves* Emerson, and thinks quite highly of Transcendentalism. He says all those things in order to claim *we need a better criticism*. Here, here! But that criticism is likely to be clear, precise, and concise, like Buell—why should the better criticism be excluded from the

culture? Can't someone like Buell help us to find deeper inspirations in Emerson? I think that's what Buell means by praising Emerson et al as thinkers and prophets—they are alive to our thinking, in the same way that philosophical thinking lives on through one's choice of philosophers to dialogue with. A literary culture is the one that produces literary artists, and so it must be what helps artists of the past to be alive to artists in the present. Can't critics act as good mediums for the past and present, unlocking someone else's insights? Isn't that the point? So, again: why exclude the purely critical? It's just a bias.



Several things are yet extant of this Pollo, who died some weeks ago. He seems to have been one of those, who would do great things if they could; but are content to compass the small. He imagined, that the precedence of authors he had established in his library, was their Mardi order of merit. He condemned the sublime poems of Vavona to his lowermost shelf. 'Ah,' thought he, 'how we library princes, lord it over these beggarly authors!' Well read in the history of their woes, Pollo pitied them all, particularly the famous; and wrote little essays of his own, which he read to himself.

——— Melville, *Mardi*, Ch. 180, "Some Pleasant, Shady Talk in the Groves, etc."



In short, our gentleman became so immersed in his reading that he spent whole nights from sundown to sunup and his days from dawn to dusk in poring over his books, until, finally, from so little sleeping and so much reading, his brain dried up and he went completely out of his mind. He had filled his imagination with everything he had read, with enchantments, knightly encounters, battles, challenges, wounds, with tales of love and its torments, and all sorts of impossible things, and as a result had come to believe that all these fictitious happenings were true; they were more real to him than anything else in the world.

——— Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Ch. 1, "The Station in Life of Don Quixote"

"Tennyson, it appears to us, belongs to the highest order of minor poets His range is exclusively that of the sentiments. He carves in ivory, and illuminates on vellum. Among contemporaries, we think Browning his superior in power of conception, Clough in depth and variety of thought; but in *tone* he has no equal. There are many salient verses, decuman waves of expression, many exquisite felicities of phrase in [*Enoch Arden*], but, compared with "Maud," the greater part of it is poet-laureatry rather than poetry." — James Russell Lowell, *North American Review*, October 1864

Editor's Table, March 2024

The coffee table in the front room is long, stacks of books filling it, both top and below shelf, with coasters cutting in like fjords where people would naturally hope to rest beverages on its top. It's a wonder more books haven't succumbed to clumsy, careless children. It sits in front of our couch, which sits with its back facing the bank of front windows that give us a broad view of the street, opening our home—but mainly the back of me, shoulders and head, as I sit and read and type, when not cooking and cleaning. I sit in the middle, so the crease between seat cushions on either side of me can nestle a book, little V's that will keep spines from breaking.

The coffee table has a certain unquestioned existence, seems natural. Why shouldn't the adults have piles of their books on every available coffee and end table surface? Kids occasionally are afforded space as well. (*Calvin and Hobbes* are always welcome.) It currently is home to several too many stacks of Rorty, which I am slowly returning to their designated shelf below, in the Office. I was working on a paper for a conference on Richard Rorty most of last year, and so now my daughter thinks Rorty—whose serene face adorns most of his late books—is one of the most famous men in the world. She thinks his enormous eyebrows are hilarious. Several at the conference knew Rorty personally; no one could figure how the eyebrows were allowed to happen. Do university press photographers just let anything go?

One of the stacks of books on the way out is on the American Revolution. I was reading around about the *Declaration of Independence* because Rorty makes a little allusion to it several times, which made a good hook to hang a paper on. I don't think about Rome once a day, but I do probably think of the *Declaration* once a week. (But I was teaching it for a while!) So down with the Wood, down with the Bailyn, Maier, and the rest. The jungle must be pared back, sacrifices must be made. Good-bye, dear Dick Rorty! It is time to let you rest. I'm sure I will moor again with thee ere long.

I have below some crumbs off my table, things that shake off as I consume in my desultory, languid fashion. Some have filtered into the main body of the journal, to fill crooks and crannies as I pick up after myself, but these have accumulated at the bottom of the bag. Shards and detritus, some are short observations on cultural life, some found objects, some aphorisms. If you have odds and ends, bits or baubles, send them to me!

I will also take Letters to the Editor, in the old fashion of magazines and newspapers.

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On February 8, Justice Kagan uttered a deep irony when confronting the issue of whether Colorado could bar Trump from appearing on their ballot: “I think that the question that you have to confront is why a single state should decide who gets to be President of the United States.” Isn’t that what happened in 2000? Isn’t that just a function of the stupid electoral college getting in the way of the popular vote, and making it states instead of voters who decide? *A fortiori*, isn’t this all just a function of democratic life being politics all the way down? Why should a single anything decide anything? Why shouldn’t it? Aren’t all of these questions a function of previous decisions about what is allowable?

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“I do have a question for you—I mentioned earlier that Trump said today that presidents must have *complete* and total immunity from prosecution for *any* crime they commit in office, uh, which is an even more extreme version of the argument his lawyers have made in court—they said presidents can be prosecuted *if* they’ve been impeached, which also seems silly. I feel like—it’s important for voters to know - that the guy they may elect - thinks he has the legal right to have them all killed. Is that just crazy? is that not kitchen table enough? for voters?” – Jon Favreau, *Pod Save America*, Friday, January 19, 2024.

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The *London Review of Books* had a good review-essay by Stefan Collini on Carlyle (Dec. 14, 2023), saying at the end that “Carlyle has always been the most discomfiting of the great Victorian sages.” That paragraph on “his deliberately outrageous views on race” ends, after smear-citing youknowwhat, “Carlyle is a walking trigger-warning.”

Even so, the case against his work doesn’t in the end rest on views that many modern readers find distasteful. Of course he offends us, though that may simply point to the fact that we sometimes overrate the negative impact of being offended and underrate its positive value. Carlyle’s writing often functions as a kind of medicine, its nasty tone an indication of its potency. Its weakness lies elsewhere: not in its provocativeness – we can allow for that, at times even savour its unabashed bloodiness – but in a mode of rhetorical excess that can be self-defeating because the register of nonstop thunderousness begins to numb our responses. Reading too much Carlyle, we start to long for a quiet lie-down.

Collini might be right that “The critic as preacher needs a more earnest and more settled moral sensibility to appeal to than is now available – or even desirable.” But I wonder. I’ve read enough Collini to know he is worried about a Moral Left becoming as dogmatic as a Moral Right, but I wonder if

there's a thirst that a good preacher can quench that isn't simply vampiric and best left to starve.

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“Why — with all the just pride which we, as a nation, feel in the peculiarly quiet heroism, the heroism of home, called forth by the circumstances of the Revolution, circumstances which afforded especial opportunity for the display, or rather the exercise, of female heroism,— why no one before Mrs. Ellet had thought of erecting the best of all monuments for the women of the Revolution, it is difficult to imagine.” From an 1849 review of *The Women of the American Revolution*, by Elizabeth F. Ellet, in the *North American Review*. The review was written by a woman, of course, so the difficulty in imagination is easy to place—all of the men who might balk at the review's later assertion that “No one perhaps will question, that the women of the Revolution bore a far larger share of its actual hardships and sufferings than the men.” Here, here!

I quote the opening paragraph of the book itself for its interest to the history of feminism (with Virginia Woolf in mind) as well as more recent attempts to understand the history of feelings and emotions and their role in the world. I note that while published in 1848, I quote from the *fifth* edition of 1851—it seems to have been a popular book.

All Americans are accustomed to view with interest and admiration the events of the Revolution. Its scenes are vivid in their memory, and its prominent actors are regarded with the deepest veneration. But while the leading spirits are thus honored, attention should be directed to the source whence their power was derived — to the sentiment pervading the mass of the people. The force of this sentiment, working in the public heart, cannot be measured; because, amidst the abundance of materials for the history of action, there is little for that of the feeling of those times. And, as years pass on, the investigation becomes more and more difficult. Yet it is both interesting and important to trace its operation. It gave statesmen their influence, and armed heroes for victory. What could they have done but for the home-sentiment to which they appealed, and which sustained them in the hour of trial and success? They were thus aided to the eminence they gained through toils and perils. Others may claim a share in the merit, if not the fame, of their illustrious deeds. The unfading laurels that wreath their brows had their root in the hearts of the people, and were nourished with their life-blood.

The feeling which wrought thus powerfully in the community depended, in great part, upon the women.

Though we might not share the Victorian morality that puts men in charge of ideas and actions and the world, and women in charge of sentiment and values and the home, it surely must be an insight that the actions we take in the world are shaped throughout our days, with and by all the people we

share those days, and do not leap directly from our brains onto the public stage.



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